

Understanding Disability Terminologies: A Guide for Employers



Introduction

Creating an inclusive workplace where every employee feels valued and understood is crucial for businesses. A key aspect of fostering such an environment is the use of appropriate disability terms.

This guide serves as a resource for employers to understand the power of language in promoting inclusion. It explores the importance of using the right terms, dispels common misconceptions, and highlights how this can contribute to a more productive and positive work environment.

Why Language Matters

The language we use shapes perceptions and experiences. By using appropriate disability terminology, we demonstrate respect and acknowledge the unique experiences of individuals. This creates a more welcoming atmosphere where employees with disabilities feel comfortable bringing their whole selves to work.

Identity-First vs. Person-First Language

One of the first things to consider is the concept of identity-first versus person-first language.

- **Identity-first language** describes a person by their disability (e.g., autistic person, Deaf person). Many disabled people prefer this language as they see their disability as an important part of their identity
- **Person-first language** prioritises the person before the disability (e.g., a person with autism, or someone with hearing and speech impairment), and not defining them by their disability. People who prefer this language feel as though their disability or diagnosis is just a part of who they are, or something completely separate from them as a person

There is no universally agreed-upon terminology to use about disability, as language is constantly evolving. Both person-first and identity-first language can be valid and appropriate, depending on personal preference.

When unsure, it's best to ask the individual their preference. This shows respect and acknowledges that disability is a personal experience.

Additionally, it's important to note that language preference can vary within disability communities. For example, many in the Autistic community prefer identity-first language ("autistic person") while others may have a different preference.

While there are general guidelines, the most important factor is always listening to the individual's preference. If you're unsure about the appropriate term, it's perfectly acceptable to politely ask the person how they prefer to be identified. This demonstrates respect and opens the door for open communication.

The Importance of Proper Terminology

Using the correct disability terminologies is essential for several reasons:

- **Respect and Dignity:** Appropriate language reflects respect for individuals with disabilities, affirming their dignity and humanity
- **Reducing Stigma:** The right terms help dismantle stereotypes and misconceptions, promoting a more accurate understanding of disabilities
- **Compliance and Best Practice:** Adhering to recommended terminologies align with legal requirements and best practices, reducing the risk of discrimination claims

Common Misconceptions and Correct Terminologies

1. "Handicap" vs. "Person with a Disability"

The term "handicapped" is outdated and can be perceived as derogatory. The preferred term is "person with a disability," which places the individual before the disability, emphasising their personhood.

2. "Suffering from" vs. "Living with"

Phrases like "suffering from" imply that the person is a victim or that their life is primarily characterised by pain and suffering. Instead, use "living with" to acknowledge the person's experience without negative connotations.

3. "Wheelchair-bound" vs. "Wheelchair User"

"Wheelchair-bound" suggests confinement and limitation. "Wheelchair user" recognises the wheelchair as a tool for mobility and independence.

4. "Person with Autism" vs. "Autistic Person"

While "person with autism" is widely accepted, more in the Irish community prefer "autistic person," viewing autism as an integral part of their identity. It's crucial to ask individuals for their preferred terminology.

5. “Mentally Ill” vs. “Person with a Mental Health Condition”

The term “mentally ill” can be stigmatising. Instead, use “person with a mental health condition” to focus on the individual rather than defining them by their condition.

6. “Normal” vs. “Neurotypical”

Referring to people without neurodivergent conditions as “normal” implies that those who are neurodivergent are abnormal. The term “neurotypical” is preferred as it avoids negative connotations and promotes understanding of neurodiversity.

7. “Invisible Disability” vs. “Non-visible Disability”

“Non-visible disability” is preferred over “invisible disability” as it emphasises that the disability is not apparent rather than implying it doesn’t exist. This terminology respects and validates the experiences of those with non-visible disabilities.

Here are some points to take into consideration before referring to someone:

- **Focus on the Person:** Use person-first language if unsure (e.g., a person with autism or, an employee who uses a wheelchair)
- **Neutral Tone:** Use neutral terms to describe a person’s disability (e.g., has low vision, uses a screen reader)
- **People-Centred:** When referring to a group, use terms like “people with disabilities” or “employees with visual impairments”

The Impact of Proper Terminology on Inclusion

Enhancing Communication

Using respectful and accurate language improves communication by fostering a more open and comfortable environment for employees with disabilities. This can lead to more effective collaboration and better integration within teams.

Building Trust and Morale

When employers use the right terminologies, it signals to employees that the organisation values diversity and is committed to inclusivity. This builds trust, boosts morale, and can enhance overall job satisfaction.

Encouraging Talent Retention and Attraction

A workplace that is sensitive to disability issues and employs respectful language is more likely to retain talented employees with disabilities and attract new ones. This contributes to a diverse talent pool, bringing varied perspectives and innovations.

Practical Steps for Employers

1. Training and Education

Regular training sessions on disability awareness and inclusive language can educate employees about the importance of proper terminology. This fosters a culture of respect and understanding

2. Updating Policies and Materials

Ensure that all company policies, communications, and materials use correct disability terminologies. This includes revising outdated documents and consistently applying the preferred language

3. Creating an Inclusive Environment

Encourage open dialogue about disabilities and create opportunities for employees to share their experiences and needs. This can be facilitated through support groups, forums, or anonymous feedback systems

Conclusion

Using the right disability terminologies is not just a matter of legal correctness but a fundamental aspect of creating a respectful and inclusive workplace. Employers who prioritise this will not only comply with legal standards but also foster a more productive, trusting, and diverse work environment. By committing to continuous learning and adaptation, businesses can ensure that all employees, regardless of their abilities, are valued and empowered to contribute their best.

For more information check the following:

For specialised training and information sessions, please contact info@employersforchange.ie, visit employersforchange.ie or [LinkedIn](#)





Employers for Change is a program of the [Open Doors Initiative](#), funded by the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth. The aim of Employers for Change is to provide an employer disability information service. The service empowers employers with all the information and advice needed to hire, employ, manage and retain staff with disabilities







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